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INCREASE IN AREA SHELLFISH CLOSURES CAUSED BY HEAVY RAINFALL

(RICHMOND, Va.) Heavy rains over the past 18 months have caused debris, sewage and animal waste to wash into many of the tidal waters from the Northern Neck area to Virginia Beach. As a result, the Virginia Department of Health (VDH) has closed several portions of these waters to protect the public from consuming potentially contaminated shellfish.

To determine the impact of the rising number of closures, VDH's Division of Shellfish Sanitation measures how much water is affected. The total size of closed shellfish waters is about 93,100 acres, an increase of 14,000 acres since January 2004. Closures have increased 17 percent over the past year and a half.

"Ingesting shellfish taken from contaminated water bodies could cause gastrointestinal illnesses such as Norovirus, Hepatitis A, and Shigella," said State Health Commissioner Robert B. Stroube, M.D., M.P.H. "These waters must remain closed for shellfish harvesting until test results indicate it is safe to reopen."

Fecal coliform organisms indicate fecal pollution from warm-blooded animals. VDH monitors the concentration of fecal coliform bacteria near shellfish beds to determine whether the waters are suitable for harvesting. Wetter years mean increased amounts of runoff and can cause higher numbers of fecal coliform bacteria to appear in shellfish growing waters. Classification of shellfish growing waters is based on samples taken over a 30-month period. Therefore it can take up to 30 months for shellfish areas to be reopened after these seasons of heavy rainfall.

VDH also conducts property-by-property inspections of septic systems on sections of watersheds in areas without sewers. They also inspect wastewater treatment facilities, marinas, livestock operations and landfills. These inspections, or "shoreline surveys," help to identify the sources of pollution.

VDH now uses global positioning system (GPS) equipment and geographic information systems (GIS) to more accurately detect pollution sources. VDH staff work with local health departments and the Department of Environmental Quality to correct waste disposal problems contaminating the water.

"Thanks to the shoreline survey program, there has not been a confirmed shellfish-borne disease outbreak associated with Virginia-grown shellfish in more than 35 years," said Robert J. Wittman, Ph.D., VDH's director of field operations for shellfish sanitation.

Although shellfish beds in the area are closed, many of these waters continue to be safe for other recreational uses such as fishing and swimming. Bivalve molluscan shellfish (oysters, clams, mussels) feed by pumping large amounts of water through their gills and filtering out their microscopic-sized food particles. Along with these small particles, they also filter out bacteria and viruses from the overlying water. Since these shellfish may be eaten raw, care has to be taken to ensure that shellfish harvested for direct marketing are taken from very clean water. Waters approved for the direct harvest of shellfish must be much cleaner than waters approved for swimming and fishing.

To find out more about the VDH Division of Shellfish Sanitation, visit

<http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/shellfish/index.asp> To view shellfish closures and shoreline surveys, log onto <http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/OEHS/Shellfish/index.asp>

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